
Critical Approaches

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Victorians and criticism

At the outset of the Victorian period, critics assumed that the visual and literary arts had a didactic role. Art conveyed moral truth, and thus contributed to the improvement and cohesion of the social body, as well as to the intellectual and spiritual nourishment of the individual. As John Ruskin suggested, ethics and aesthetics were related: the best art conveyed ‘the greatest number of the greatest ideas . . . [and] exercises and exalts the faculty by which it is received’ (1903: III: 92). Early Victorian criticism concentrated, therefore, on the ideas and values embedded in the work, usually considering formal elements – beauties of style, structure and technique – only insofar as they made content attractive and accessible. In this way, Victorian criticism served as a regulatory mechanism, policing subjects that art presented to the public gaze. Works that challenged favoured beliefs and traditional forms – from *Jane Eyre* (1847) to Swinburne’s poetic blasphemies – were denigrated as artistic failures. Such criticism endorsed the legitimacy – and hence the ‘truth’ – of the ideas conveyed. Moreover, as the conduit of

moral teaching, the artist was also judged in terms of sincerity and intellect, 'fineness' of perception and 'abundance' of 'moving thoughts' (Mill 1981: 361).

However, Victorian criticism gradually changed, in line with shifting views about intellectual authority. When religious doubt and the pressures of secular life shattered consensus, the relationship between critic and public was subtly altered. Instead of policing artistic work on behalf of the community, criticism took a leading role in determining the values needed by a confused society. Humanist critics, such as Matthew Arnold, argued that high culture, especially literature, offered the one reliable basis for consolation and enlightenment because it focused on the inner dimension of human experience. In 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1865), Arnold installed the critic as the moral guide and guardian of the nation, ready 'to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' ([1865] 1910: 38). Although mid-Victorian critics still made evaluative pronouncements, they accepted Arnold's challenge to be cultural reformers, seeking 'what will nourish us in growth toward perfection' (40). To accomplish this end, they required the capacity to observe dispassionately, to analyse, compare and discriminate.

By the late-Victorian period, however, new theories of art and beauty blurred the boundaries between the making and the interpreting of an artistic work. Aestheticism, savouring beautiful form for its own sake, presented both a problem and an opportunity. The Aesthetes rejected a functional view of art. As Oscar Wilde claimed, '*[a]ll art is quite useless*' ([1890/1] 2005: 168). Since the reinforcement of moral values was irrelevant to artistic practice and to the merit of a work, criticism that focused on the moral utility of art was meaningless. Instead, Aesthetic critics like Wilde and Pater focused on conveying the pleasurable effects of art at conscious and unconscious levels. The successful critic was no longer the person who could identify and evaluate the ideas encoded in a work, but the sensitive and responsive observer who, like any artist, was inward-looking, striving solely to

'know one's impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly' (Pater [1873] 1893: x).

By the end of the century, a new approach was added to the Victorian critical repertoire. The impressionist Aesthetic critic demonstrated how a work stimulated the imagination to shape its own version of 'truth'. An excellent example can be found in Pater's analysis of Leonardo da Vinci's painting, 'Mona Lisa'. Pater does not try to excavate some underlying meaning of the work, nor speculate on the circumstances of its production; nor is he concerned with an analysis of craftsmanship. Instead, he *recreates* the painting, finding a striking new image to serve as an analogy for the effect of the painting on his own emotional and aesthetic sensibilities: 'She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave' ([1873] 1893: 132). This imaginative interaction of creative and critical faculties is central to Wilde's construction of both artist *and* interpreter in his essay, 'The Critic as Artist' (1888).

Critical approaches in the twentieth century

Criticism of the Victorians – both their culture and their literature – began in the twentieth century with a very palpable hit. Lytton Strachey's (1880–1932) heretical *Eminent Victorians* (1918), a collection of four essays each devoted to a representative pillar of the Victorian establishment, revealed a pompous, self-satisfied, hypocritical and base society. His portraits of Cardinal Manning, Thomas Arnold, Florence Nightingale and General Gordon revealed smooth operators intent on self-promotion and careful of appearances, but devoid of high principles and intellectual honesty. By demolishing these icons of respectability, Strachey established a new myth of Victorian dullness and moral duplicity. Read today, his book seems full of acid resentment and spitefulness, employed mainly to show the liberated sophistication of his own generation. Nonetheless, his interpretation of the period shaped the general perception of Victorian culture for many decades to come.

Early scholarly attention to Victorian literature took the same line, discarding many authors as unworthy, minor and drab. In truth, the Victorian canon constructed in criticism between 1900 and the 1950s largely reflected the make-up and tastes of university departments at this time (white, male, heterosexual, secular, liberal-humanist and entranced by the stylistically adventurous or 'modern'). Victorian dramatists, women writers, working-class writers, popular culture and most prose writers outside the limited literary 'canon' were generally discounted. On the whole, fiction was less valued than poetry, the latter being considered the most intellectually challenging of the literary arts. Literary historians, such as George Saintsbury (1896) and David Cecil (1934), surveyed Victorian writing as a straightforward mirror of its age. They considered authors in their historical chronology, establishing traditions, influences and continuities and pointing out relationships between genres, themes and styles. Meanings – both literary and cultural – were generally felt to be unproblematic, and criticism took an 'appreciative' line, assuming that all right-thinking readers would understand the view of life that such work presented.

Canon formation – establishing the hierarchy of important Victorian writers and works – also seemed largely unproblematic. It centred largely on 'great men of letters' (and a few female writers who matched the patriarchal criteria). Authors who had a prominent public role in speaking *to* the Victorian nation and who seemed representative of high culture were particularly valued: Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, Dickens, Eliot and Hardy. A few critics saw Victorian writing as a response to complex historical and political circumstances, notably the French scholar, Louis Cazamian (1904), who investigated fiction that explicitly engaged with the 'Condition of England'. Many, following in Strachey's footsteps, read both fiction and poetry as symptomatic of Victorian hypocrisy, repression and narrow-mindedness.

In the first half of the twentieth century, literary criticism tended to take Victorians at their own word. Rather like many Victorian critics, F. R. Leavis (1936; 1948) focused

judgementally on the moral weight and sonority of an author's ideas. Just as the Victorians proclaimed the functional value of artistic truth, Leavis and his followers rated nineteenth-century writers largely for their capacity to refine the sensibility of readers and provide values by which to live. Leavis assessed the moral seriousness of particular authors on the basis of his personal intuition and liberal-humanist philosophy. The authors he valued were said to express timeless 'universal' insights into human nature and propose ethical frameworks for an age stripped of religious belief. What emerged was an elitist interpretation of Victorian culture and its literature that rendered it remarkably homogeneous. While attention was given to the ways in which Victorian writers addressed social change, criticism at this time did not analyse the ideological assumptions informing literary works, nor consider the specific historical conditions governing its creation and reception.

Mid-twentieth century, however, a more complex view of Victorian writing emerged, due largely to the increasing interest in psychoanalytic and historical approaches. The 'alienated' Victorian, torn between the desires of the body and the demands of the soul, replaced the Victorian as prophet or hypocrite (Miyoshi 1969). New attention to neglected writers, such as Arthur Hugh Clough, Robert Louis Stevenson, Emily Brontë and Gerard Manley Hopkins, extended the canon (Miller 1963). Analysis of the untidy contradictions, ambiguities and tensions revealed in the techniques and themes of these writers encouraged a new mapping of nineteenth-century cultural forms. Victorian literature no longer delivered a cohesive and consistent cultural viewpoint. Individual authors, like Browning, who had previously been read as earnest and robust now appeared anxious and uncertain.

Raymond Williams (1958; 1970) also advanced criticism by introducing Marxist readings of Victorian literature and culture. Although earlier scholars had placed nineteenth-century writing in a simple historical framework, Williams was one of the first to consider how Victorian literature was

shaped by and circulated particular ideological viewpoints. Novels about industrialization, for example, now seemed much more ambiguous, with authors simultaneously celebrating this progressive economic phenomenon and condemning its attendant evils. Williams and the critics he influenced deepened understanding of what it meant to interpret literature through historical and cultural contexts.

CURRENT ISSUES AND DEBATES

New theoretical approaches in the last quarter of the twentieth century have considerably altered the critical approach to Victorian writing. Feminism, New Historicism (and cultural materialism) and postcolonial theory have introduced new subjects of study as well as new analytical methods. Overall, this theoretical refreshment has revealed the political and cultural complexity of Victorian literature, establishing that the relationship between literary form, history and 'life' is problematic. The ideological basis of Victorian artistic representations has become a central point of debate.

Important interventions from feminist criticism have transformed the Victorian canon, beginning with Elaine Showalter (1977) who mapped the neglected, but significant, 'alternative' tradition of women's writing in the period. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) analysed the psychological conflicts apparent in the work of female authors, reading literary form as an expression of writers' anxiety *and* protest about the restrictive definitions of femininity available in a patriarchal society and literary tradition. The wider outgrowth from feminism – gender theory – has enriched understanding of Victorian cultural politics and incorporated further marginalized authors into the canon, in terms, for example, of *fin-de-siècle* culture (Showalter 1991), popular fiction (Bristow 1991) and periodical literature (Fraser *et al.* 2003). There has been extensive research on the representation of alternative models of masculinity and sexuality, showing the way in which particular literary forms

encoded dissident identities for select Victorian audiences. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), for example, traced the different literary expressions of Victorian homophobia and homoeroticism. The application of gender theory to Victorian women's poetry (Leighton 1992) and 'New Woman' writing (Ledger 1997; Richardson 2001) has generated new readings and recovered neglected authors.

Historicist criticism has altered understanding of the relationship between Victorian literature, its cultural context, and the material conditions affecting its production and circulation. The intersection of literature with the language and ideas of other Victorian discursive fields, like science (Beer 2000) and medicine (Shuttleworth 1996), has generated new interdisciplinary scholarship and shown how contentious subjects (like the body) are anxiously written into and out of particular works. Historicism has also challenged earlier assumptions about the straightforward, transparent nature of specific forms, genres and modes, like realism and the Gothic, as well as revising ideas about the 'truthfulness' of literary language. This critical approach, inflected by the work of Michel Foucault and exemplified by D. A. Miller (1988) and Mary Poovey (1995), has drawn attention to the operation of Victorian literature as a cultural form, acting in conjunction with a range of other non-literary cultural 'texts' to disseminate specific ways of thinking and to inscribe, or resist, particular ideological positions. Historicist and gender approaches have also been effectively combined to show the sophistication of writing previously discounted by literary scholars, such as sensation fiction (Pykett 1992).

Although postcolonial theory primarily focuses on the writing of colonial and postcolonial cultures, it too has influenced the reading of Victorian literature produced by the 'home' culture. Like feminist and historicist criticism, postcolonial theory draws attention to literary discourse as ideologically shaped and understood. Patrick Brantlinger (1988) and Daniel Bivona (1990) have demonstrated how Empire inhabits Victorian texts silently and circumspectly, from *Jane Eyre* to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and

Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Postcolonial theory has encouraged scholars to consider how far even radical Victorian literature routinely legitimizes imperial assumptions about cultural differences and racial origins.

Such approaches continue to bear fruit in a wide range of new topics and fields of study. Working-class writing, by its nature more ephemeral and less well preserved and documented, is steadily being recovered. The relationship between narrative methods, cultural crisis and 'popular' genres is prompting reassessment of domestic romance, detective writing and early science fiction. Alternative Victorian ideas about identity, at personal and social levels, are being uncovered through interdisciplinary research into Victorian literature and nineteenth-century science, psychology, medicine, law, economics and religion. Contemporary criticism has also attached new academic value to Victorian prose and to the 'history of the book'. The latter field involves the study of the material production and dissemination of writing, as well as the reading habits of different social groups. One important area is the relation between writing style, commercial imperatives and the format in which a book is published. Another is the way Victorian writers communicated their intentions through the physical design and publication format of a volume, as well as through its coded contents.

Undoubtedly, recent developments in critical and cultural theory have introduced new themes and topics into the study of Victorian literature. Above all, however, these new approaches have reinserted Victorian literature *into*, rather than alongside, cultural history. Literary works are no longer regarded simply as mirrors of the past, or as entertaining adjuncts to the 'business' of a society. Literature is now firmly embedded as one of many dynamic cultural forms of the Victorian era, producing and being produced by its historical moment. As twenty-first century scholars, we can never 'recover' its meaning for a Victorian reader; but we can collaborate to produce new interpretations that are culturally inclusive, and deepen our sense of connection with a fascinating age.